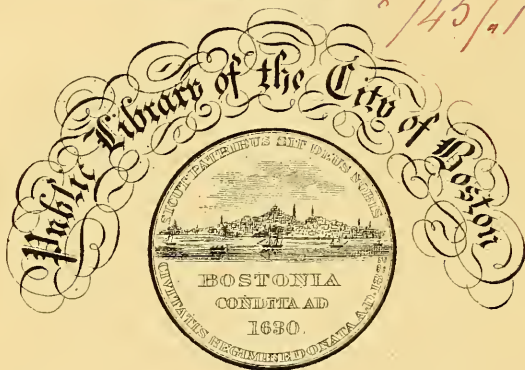



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DR WOODS'S

SERMON ON FAITH.

1826

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SERMON

ON THE

NATURE AND INFLUENCE

OF FAITH.

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SERMON.



Hebrews xi. 1.

NOW FAITH IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE
EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN.

ALTHOUGH the nature of faith seems to be very simple and obvious, and the language of the inspired writers respecting it very intelligible ; there is perhaps no subject, which has been more perplexing to the minds of men, or on which they have entertained more obscure and erroneous conceptions. This is indeed a deplorable fact ; and before entering on my principal subject, I wish, as far as I am able, satisfactorily to account for it ; which I shall attempt to do by the following considerations.

1. *The objects of faith are remote from the province of our senses.* Our earliest attention is directed to the present world. We form a habit of looking at the things which are seen. To this habit we are led, as the creatures of sense. When therefore we attempt to get right views of faith, we are under the necessity of casting off the dominion of our early habits ; of counteracting the influence of things temporal ; of breaking away from the enchantments of sense, and turning the current of our thoughts and feelings into a new channel. No person, who has in earnest attempted this, needs to be told with what difficulties it is attended.

2. Another thing, which renders it difficult for us to get clear and operative views of faith, is, *that the language which*

describes it has been so often heard and spoken by us, without any correspondent conceptions or feelings. This custom of speaking or hearing the words of inspiration, and of Christian piety, without the conceptions which those words ought to excite, creates a new difficulty. For whenever that language is repeated, the mind is apt to lie in the same listless state, as formerly. We find it hard to bring ourselves to attend in earnest to a subject, which has often passed before us without exciting attention.

3. It is still more to the purpose to observe, that *such is the nature of faith, that it cannot be rightly apprehended, without being experienced and felt.* Christian faith does not consist chiefly in a speculative discernment of external objects. It is, in a great measure, a matter of *affection*. But how can an *affection* be properly known, except by those who have been the subjects of it? And even as to real believers, faith exists in them in so low a degree, that they are exposed to something of the same difficulty. For how can they form lucid conceptions of that, which operates in their own minds so feebly, that it is hardly visible?—But

4. It is most of all important to observe, that *right apprehensions of faith are prevented, and mistaken apprehensions occasioned, by the prevalence of passions opposed to faith.* The corrupt affections of the heart render us blind to spiritual, holy objects. They not only prevent us from exercising faith, but make us averse to perceive what it is; because such perception would lead to self-reproof and self-condemnation. In this case, it is eminently true, *that the natural man discerneth not the things of the Spirit; for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* And just so far as sinful affection prevails in Christians, it hinders spiritual discernment as really, as in the impenitent.

Such causes as these are sufficient to account for the ob-

scure and erroneous views, which are commonly entertained of faith, and for the peculiar difficulty which attends all our efforts to make it well understood.

After these preliminary observations, permit me to call your attention directly to the subject introduced by the text. *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* I shall avail myself particularly of this text, and of the chapter which contains it, in executing my present design ; which is, *to illustrate the nature and practical influence of faith.*

The brief description here given of faith is this. *It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* The original word, *ὑποστασις*, rendered *substance*, primarily signifies a *pillar* or *basis*, on which any thing is firmly supported, so that it cannot be moved aside or fall. Nearly allied to this is the metaphorical sense ; that is, *firm trust*, or *confidence*, a *certain, unshaken hope*, or *expectation*, on which, as a *basis*, the mind rests and is supported. Faith is as full a persuasion of those things which God has revealed, as can in other things be produced by the evidence of our senses. It gives present *subsistence* and *reality* to the objects of hope.

Faith is also *the evidence of things not seen.* It is, as *ελεγχος*, the original word, signifies, a *proof* or *demonstration* made by *certain evidence.* Or rather, as it is here used, it is the effect produced in the mind by evidence ; *the full persuasion* which results from *the most satisfactory proof.*

You will perceive that the *faith* here spoken of, respects not only the future good, which is made known by the promises of God, and is the proper object of hope, but other invisible things, even things past, which God has in one way or another made known to us. It is remarkable, that the very first instance of faith, here mentioned by the Apostle, relates to *past* events. *Through faith we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God.*

The *foundation of faith* is the *moral perfection of God*, particularly his *veracity*. The understanding of God is infinite; therefore he cannot mistake. God is infinitely holy and good; and therefore he cannot lie. In the exercise of faith, we fix our eye upon a Being of absolute perfection. Whatever such a Being declares, we know must be truth. In this general view, faith seems to have as real a concern with the manifestations which God makes in his *works*, as with the declarations of his *word*. When we observe the works of God in creation and providence, we *believe* that the manifestations he there makes, and the instructions he gives, are *true*. We know that a Being of perfect moral excellence will no more deceive us by the aspect of his countenance, or by the motion of his hand, or by the characters which his finger inscribes on his works, than by the words which he utters.

It is evident that the foundation of *religious faith* is vastly more sure, than human belief in any other instance. Does our belief rest on the opinion or the testimony of *man*? Man may be mistaken, or may deceive. Does it rest on the deductions of *reason*? Those deductions may be fallacious. But *the word of the LORD* is infallible truth; and so it becomes the foundation of the most confident faith.

The foundation of religious faith, I have said, must be *the word of God*. It must be a declaration, for the truth of which the honor of God is pledged. This declaration may, however, be conveyed to us by human testimony. For example; we are informed by John Baptist, and by the Apostles, that God uttered a voice from heaven, saying, *this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*. This declaration is the subject of *religious faith*, because, by means of credible witnesses, we come to know that it was the declaration of God. Having satisfactory evidence that God declared this truth, we believe it on the ground of his *veracity*. In whatever way a declaration of God

is conveyed to us, our faith in it rests ultimately upon his veracity. This would be perfectly obvious, if we should ourselves hear the divine declaration; that is, if the divine declaration should be conveyed to us through the medium of our own senses. And why not, if the same declaration is conveyed to us through the undoubted testimony of others? In both cases, we are first satisfied that God made the declaration. We then believe it with a faith which rests on his veracity. Suppose we become acquainted with a doctrine declared by Socrates, Augustine, or Newton. It is what a *man* declares; a man not divinely inspired; a man, not God. Now do we believe it, because it is declared by such an one? No. We look for other evidence. But looking for other evidence shows, that we have not perfect confidence in him who makes the declaration.

As the word of God, or the veracity of God in his word, is the ultimate ground of religious faith; so the word of God, or divine revelation, is *the rule* of faith. If in any respect whatever we believe differently from the word of God; we depart from the rule, and our faith is, in that respect, erroneous. If we believe less than what God reveals, our faith is defective; if more, it has a faulty redundancy. The only way to have our faith right, is *to conform it exactly to the rule of God's word*; taking care, first, to understand the rule correctly, that our faith may not bend to the one side or the other; secondly, to understand it fully, that our faith may not fall short; thirdly, to restrain the lofty aspirings of reason, and the surmises of curiosity, and to be entirely content with the rule, so that our faith may not overleap its bounds.

Before we touch upon the moral tendency, or the practical influence of faith, it is of material importance to observe, that it implies a *right temper of heart*; in other words, that it implies affections correspondent to the nature of its various objects. It is generally the manner of Scripture expressly to designate the

particular external action, or the action of the understanding, which is required, and that only, upon the reasonable supposition of its being always attended with suitable feelings. Intelligent creatures, possessed, as we are, of a moral nature, must understand, that *moral affection* is to accompany every act of obedience, and that without it, no act of obedience can be acceptable to him, who is the Searcher and Sovereign of the heart. To require the action is, by manifest implication, to require a corresponding state of the heart. And when the action is recorded as having been performed, it is understood that the heart accompanied it. God requires us to *call upon his name*. This, considered literally and simply, is an outward act,—an outward act merely. But this is not the sense in which it is required. It is required, as an expression of the heart; the heart being understood not only to agree with the devout words uttered by the voice, but to prompt those words. So when the Evangelist gives an account of the *great faith* of the centurion, he simply relates his words and external actions. Every body understands, without being expressly informed, that those words and actions were indicative of correspondent feelings. Unless understood in this manner, the narrative amounts to nothing.

The principle I have laid down is obviously applicable to every thing, which is spoken of in Scripture, as a matter of moral obligation; every thing which relates to man, as a moral agent. If the obligation respects him, as a moral agent; then the performance of the duty required includes the action of the whole man, so far as he is of a moral nature. For example; God says to us, “hear my word;” *hear* it. But the duty enjoined is not hearing with the ear merely, the heart being disobedient; but hearing with a right disposition, and right conduct. Again. Christ requires us *to receive* the sacramental bread and wine *in remembrance of him*. But merely the outward act of *receiving* and the exercise of *memory* do not constitute the duty enjoined.

The outward act and the exercise of memory must be accompanied with affections suitable to the nature of what is commemorated. So all Christians understand it. So every thing of the kind must be understood. And while we have conscience and moral affection, and remember that we are under a moral government, we certainly shall so understand it, whether we are expressly told that we must, or not.

I repeat the position, as of primary importance, *that whenever faith is spoken of as a moral virtue, or with regard to its moral influence, we must consider it, as implying affections of heart correspondent to the nature of those objects which it respects.* Such affections must accompany it, and make a part of it, or, in the Scripture sense, it is not faith.

When I say that faith implies affections corresponding with its various objects, it is the same as saying, that faith assumes a *character* according to the nature of its particular objects: If it relates to an object great and awful, it is accompanied with reverence and awe; if to an object that is amiable, it is accompanied with love; if to a future or absent good, with desire; if to something hateful, with abhorrence; if to something injurious or dreadful, with fear or dread. Thus faith may be said to revere, to love, to desire, to hate, or to dread, just according to the nature of its particular object.

We shall now proceed to consider *the practical influence of faith.* And before we have done, I think it will be apparent, not only that the influence of faith is very great, but that it results directly from the peculiar nature, which has now been represented as belonging to it.

In the word of God we find the most important effects attributed to *faith.* It is represented as having an efficacy, which moves all the springs of action, and controls the whole man. Now a little consideration must satisfy us, that it is perfectly suit-

ed to produce this mighty effect. For, in truth, what is there in the universe, suited to influence the mind or control the actions of man, which does not belong to *faith*. Those things which God has made known in his word, and which are the *objects* of faith, are of the highest conceivable moment. Indeed they have an importance infinitely above our comprehension. God has set before us a great and endless good to be obtained ; a great and endless evil to be avoided. And he has set these before us in all the forms, which are adapted to rouse the affections and the efforts of man. Do any of you say, that the endless good and the endless evil which God has revealed, come not under our observation ; and then ask, how the existence of such things can certainly be known ? My answer is, *Thus saith the Lord*. This is the best of all evidence. Other things may deceive me. But *God cannot lie*. I am sure what *HE* says is truth. Or do you say, that the things which God has declared in his word, being *invisible* and *distant*, cannot excite any strong emotion, or any powerful effort ? This, I admit, is true with regard to those who are governed by sense. But it is the very nature of faith to give an uncontrollable efficacy to objects *invisible* and *distant*. All must allow that the things which God has revealed must have a mighty influence upon us, if they were actually *visible* and *present*. To faith they *are* visible. To faith they are *present* too. Faith removes the distance ; and makes them present realities. So that things which are not seen, and things which are to take place thousands of ages hence, excite the same emotions, and have the same practical influence, as though they were actually visible, and actually present. In the exercise of faith, we say of unseen and future things ; they are absolutely certain, because God has declared them. They are equally interesting to us, as if they were present ; for they *will* be present ; and we shall experience them and feel them, when happiness will be as dear to us, and misery

as dreadful, as they are now. They deserve our regard, therefore, just as though they were present. So that, if the glorious excellencies of God, and the employments and pleasures of heaven are sufficient to move the hearts and govern the actions of saints and angels who are now there, they are sufficient to move and govern *us*. If the transactions of the judgment day, if the glorious appearing of the Lord from heaven, the assembling of the universe before him, the disclosure of the secrets of all hearts, the final sentence, the blessedness of the righteous, and the horror and despair of the wicked, will be sufficient to arrest the attention, and touch the feelings, and move all the active powers of those who will be present on that momentous occasion; they are sufficient to arrest *our* attention, to touch our feelings, and move all our powers of action *now*. And just so far as we have faith, they will do it. Men generally look at things which are seen. Sensible objects govern their affections, and limit the sphere of their observation. But faith shifts the scene. As to the grand, governing objects of the human mind, and the motives to action, it puts them in a new world. It spreads a shroud over the things of time and sense, and opens to view things unseen and eternal.

I am now to illustrate the *practical influence* of faith; and this I shall do by bringing into view various instances of it mentioned in the context, and in other parts of Scripture.

Through faith, says the Apostle, *we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God*. It is *through faith*, because we have an *understanding* of it merely by *believing* the testimony of God respecting it, which is contained in the Scriptures.

By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. Abel cordially believed what God had said concerning the Seed of the woman. He listened to the appoint-

ment of sacrifices, which were doubtless intended to represent the future atonement. And according to the divine direction, and with correspondent feelings, he offered a sin-offering. Whereupon God gave him a testimony, that his offering was accepted. Cain's offering was faulty, because he wanted *faith*; i. e. because he did not cordially believe the promise of God, nor render sincere obedience to his appointment.

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death. Enoch walked with God. He was habitually sensible of his presence, confided in his promise, and looked at eternal things. Such was the operation of his *faith*. God rewarded his faith by taking him immediately to heaven, without his seeing death. Thus he obtained his translation *by faith*.

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark. Here the nature of faith begins to appear still more clearly. God said, *the end of all flesh is come; behold I will destroy them with the earth.* He then gave command to Noah to make an ark. Though the destruction of the world by a deluge was a thing which no one had ever seen or heard of before; Noah cordially believed that word of God which asserted it. In his view, God's saying it made it a certainty. He had no more doubt of it, than he had after it had rained forty days and forty nights. Thus he prepared an ark *by faith*, or in *consequence of faith*; that is, in consequence of his *confidently believing* what God had declared. Had he not believed the declaration of God, he would not have done this.

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. God commanded Abraham to go out of his country unto another land, and promised to make of him a great nation. Abraham had perfect confidence in God, and so looked upon the thing which he promis-

ed, as absolutely certain. This perfectly accounts for his leaving his kindred, and going out he knew not whither. Simple, childlike faith in God was the principle of his conduct.

The writer, v. 17, clearly exhibits his idea of faith with respect to those servants of God whom he had just mentioned. *These all died in faith, not having received the promises,* (that is, the good things contained in the promises,) *but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them.* God had at different times, promised them everlasting blessings in the world to come. These promises they fully believed, and confidently expected the blessings promised. They anticipated those blessings with so strong a desire, and so lively a persuasion of their reality, that they may be said to have already embraced them, and begun to enjoy them. Now all this excitement of their feelings, and the conduct which flowed from it, was the effect of their cordially believing the promises of God, and with perfect assurance expecting their accomplishment.

The nature and influence of faith appeared eminently in the conduct of Abraham respecting Isaac. God had promised that in Isaac his seed should be called, and all the families of the earth blessed. On *Isaac* every thing seemed to depend. If *Isaac* should die, what would become of the divine promises? What would become of the calling of Abraham's seed, and the blessing which was to come upon all nations? Yet Abraham had such a belief, so lively and certain a persuasion, that God was true, and would accomplish his word, that he hesitated not, when commanded, to sacrifice his son Isaac. Why was not Abraham agitated and perplexed with the difficulties, which attended that distressing affair? Why was he not pressed with the various objections which might be urged against the sacrifice of Isaac? Simply, because he had *faith*. Faith in God answered all objections; relieved all difficulties. It was enough for Abraham, that God had promised. But how would it be

possible for God to fulfil his promise, if Isaac should be slain? With such a question as this, Abraham gave himself no concern. He knew that God had an unfailing resource in himself; that he could do any thing which the case required; that he could, if necessary, even *raise Isaac from the dead*; though the idea of a resurrection from the dead was probably a suggestion of Abraham's strong faith, as no such event had ever taken place. Thus the main-spring of action in this whole affair, was that faith, which is a full confidence in the word of God, and a certain, lively expectation that it will be accomplished, whatever difficulties may stand in the way.

Joseph, at the close of his life, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and commanded that his bones should be carried with them into Canaan, *by faith*; that is, because he believed the promise of God respecting the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, and looked upon that departure, as a reality, a matter of fact,—just as we do now.

We have an account too of the faith of Moses. He believed the promises of God respecting the deliverance of the Israelites, and the everlasting blessings to be conferred on the faithful in another world. He chose, therefore, to have his lot with his suffering brethren, how much soever it might cost him. The good, which the sure promise of God led him to expect, was, he well knew, infinitely better than all the treasures of Egypt, and infinitely more than an overbalance for all the sufferings to which he might be exposed. He endured as seeing the invisible God, from whom he expected support and deliverance.

At the close of this interesting account, the inspired writer gives a summary description of the efficacy of faith in various other instances, in the following sublime and moving strain.

“What shall I say more? For the time would fail me to tell

of Gideon and Barak, and Samson, and Jephthah, and David, and Samuel, and the prophets; who *through faith*," that is, *animated and borne on by unwavering confidence in God*, "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, put to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead, raised to life again; and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonments. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented." What the servants of God did and suffered in all these cases was, *by faith*. They believed the word of God. They were sensible of his presence. They sought and expected the blessings he had promised. They acted with a view to those blessings, and by anticipation lived upon them. God's everlasting kingdom contained a blessedness so great and precious, that it roused all their desires, and all their efforts; and in pursuit of it hardships and sufferings became light, and the most painful enterprises easy and delightful. Such was the power of faith.

The chapter to which we have now attended contains, as we have seen, a particular description of the influence of faith,—a description which is very intelligible and impressive, and which can hardly fail to satisfy any attentive reader, as to the exact view which the writer entertained of his subject.

But to cast a still clearer light on this subject, and to illustrate the perfect agreement of the inspired writers respecting it, I shall show that faith, in other prominent instances, must be considered as having the same nature, and that its influence is to be accounted for in the same manner.

2 Cor. 5: 7. *For we walk by faith, not by sight.* Faith is here represented as the essential principle of the Christian life. And what this faith is, we readily learn from the connexion. *We walk,—not by sight.* That is, we are not influenced in our conduct by a regard to the things which are seen. *But we walk by faith ; we look at the things which are not seen ;* we are influenced by a regard to spiritual, eternal objects. And how are those unseen, spiritual objects made known, but by *the word of God?* And how do we look at them, or regard them, so as to be influenced by them, but by *faith ;* that is, by cordially believing the word of God?

James 1:6. *But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.* The faith to be exercised in prayer, is here put in opposition to a doubtful, wavering mind, and so must imply a cordial, settled belief in the doctrines and promises of God's word.

In Acts 15 : 9, Peter represents, that God purified the hearts of Gentile converts, *by faith ;* that is, by a steady, cordial belief in the truths of the Gospel ; or which is the same thing, by a steady, cordial regard to those invisible, spiritual things, which the word of God reveals.

Some men appear to think that there is something in *evangelical faith*, or *faith in Christ*, essentially different from other kinds of faith ; and that the account, which I have given of the nature and influence of faith generally, cannot be received as in any measure satisfactory in relation to this particular instance of it. How far such an opinion has any adequate support, a careful attention to the subject will quickly show.

Faith I have represented to be a firm, cordial belief in the veracity of God, in all the declarations of his word ; or, a full and affectionate confidence in the certainty of those things which God has declared, and because he has declared them. Whatever may be the divine testimony, and to whatever object it may relate, faith receives it, and rests upon it. This is its gen-

eral nature. That most important branch of faith, called *Evangelical faith*, differs from other instances of faith only in regard to object. The testimony of God, which evangelical faith receives, respects the SAVIOUR. If then you would know what faith in Christ is, in distinction from other exercises of faith; inquire, what is the testimony of God concerning his Son? What does the Scripture say of his character, his works, his instructions, his atonement, his various offices and blessings? This testimony respecting Christ is just what faith receives. Determine precisely what this testimony is, and you determine the peculiar character of evangelical faith.

And here we shall readily see how it comes to pass that faith in Christ so often has the sense of *affectionate trust*, or *affiance*? The object, which the word of God, in this case reveals, and which evangelical faith respects, is obviously, and in the highest degree, worthy of such trust. He is infinitely wise, benevolent, and powerful, and therefore deserves to be trusted by all intelligent beings. He is a glorious, all-sufficient SAVIOUR, and therefore deserves to be trusted in by sinners. Cordial affiancement, or trust, is the very disposition in us, which is agreeable to the character and offices of Christ. To admit that there is such a Saviour, and yet to repose no affectionate trust in him, would be a shocking and most criminal inconsistency. Accordingly, this affectionate trust, which always accompanies faith when such is its object, becomes frequently the principal thing signified by the word.

By this principle, you may easily trace out the particular senses, in which the word, *faith*, is used in various other passages of Scripture. First, see what is the nature of the object, to which faith has respect in the particular case to be considered. Then see what is the temper of mind with which we ought to contemplate that object; or what is the effect it ought to produce upon us. That temper of mind, that proper effect of faith

may become the chief thing intended by the writer who uses the word. In some passages, for example, faith is obviously used, as Schleusner and others remark, for *conversion to Christianity*; because such conversion is *the proper consequence of believing the truths of the Gospel*; whereas if a man should believe those truths, and yet not turn from his sins, he would be guilty of doing violence to his own reason. In other places, faith seems to denote *obedience*; manifestly, because faith respects Christ, as a righteous Lawgiver and Ruler, and so directly leads to obedience; and a man who should believe Christ to be such a Lawgiver and Ruler, and yet should not obey him, would act most inconsistently and perversely.

The practical results of the view which has now been taken of the nature and influence of faith, and *the reflections* arising from it, are so numerous and important, that I shall feel it necessary to give them greater prominence and extent than is usual.

1. We are led to reflect on the general character of *false faith*. False faith always misapprehends, in a greater or less degree, the meaning of the divine testimony. This is *one* of its chief faults. The other is, that even where, as to speculation, it correctly understands the divine testimony, it is wanting in right feeling.

There is one particular kind of faith, which has had no small credit in some parts of the Christian world, but which we can easily prove to be unscriptural and false, by the principles established in the foregoing discussion. In the exercise of that kind of faith to which I now refer, a man believes, without regard to his character, that Christ died for him in particular, and has forgiven, or certainly will forgive his sins. Consider now, that true faith always looks to the divine testimony, and is conformed to it. In this case, then, the first question is, what is the testimony of God respecting those who are pardoned, and

to whom the blessings of Christ's death are promised? The answer is at hand. *Repent and believe, that your sins may be blotted out. He that believeth on the Son, hath life; but he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.* But under the influence of that faith, which I would now expose, a man believes, without any evidence of piety, that God has forgiven his sins, and made him an heir of heaven. He has not repented; has not been born again; is without holiness. Still he believes his sins are forgiven, and his name written in heaven. But in believing this, he *disbelieves* the divine testimony. The Scripture declares, that no man of such a character is pardoned. He believes that he is pardoned, because he does not believe the word of God.

We have here, then, a general test of faith. It is not our business to inquire, whether any man's faith is agreeable to this or that system of opinions, to such a deduction of reason, or to such a dream of fancy. Our simple inquiry is, whether it is agreeable to the word of God; whether, as to apprehension and feeling, it is an exact counterpart to the divine testimony.

2. It is easy to see *what influence Christian faith must have in forming our religious opinions.* A man of faith regulates his opinions by the only rule of faith, *the word of God.* Whatever may be the subject of investigation, he seeks to know what God the Lord will say. Whether the doctrines of Scripture are agreeable to his previous views, or not; whether comprehensible, or incomprehensible, is not his question at all. When he finds what God says, his inquiry ends; his opinions are fixed. But a man wanting in Christian faith is not satisfied with this. He may indeed perceive what God says; but he must look further. One says; how can this be? It is so inconsistent with reason, so different from every thing which nature and philosophy teach, that I must regard it as utterly incredible. Another

asks, whether the doctrine in question would be agreeable to his particular party. The object of inquiry with a third is, whether the doctrine proposed would require him to deny any of his inclinations, or to forego any of his honors or pleasures. In despite of the clearest evidence from the word of God, they govern their opinions by just such considerations as these. And all this, because they have not *faith*. What wonder is it then, that men, destitute of faith, should be carried about with every wind of doctrine, and embrace opinions as distant as possible from the decisions of holy writ.

We see also, that Christians are likely to agree in their religious opinions, in proportion to the activity and strength of their faith. The testimony of God is one. The rule of their opinions is one. If their faith is active in searching after the testimony of God, and strong to receive it, whatever it may be, they are surely in the way to union.

My *third* reflection is, *that Christian faith is suited at once to humble man, and to glorify God.* First; it *humbles man*. The divine testimony, which it receives, rises far above the reach of our understanding, and by its sacred and incomprehensible doctrines, is suited to bring down the pride of reason. Again; the divine testimony represents man to be exceedingly guilty, vile, and helpless. When we believe that testimony, we believe ourselves to be just so guilty, vile, and helpless. Thus we are laid low, and made to feel that shame and blushing belong to us.

But the same faith that humbles man, *exalts and glorifies God.* The Apostle says, Rom. 4 : 20, 21. *that Abraham staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was able also to perform.* The promise, as you will recollect, was one which seemed impossible to be performed. But Abraham readily believed it, and anticipated the performance of it as a certainty. He was as fully

persuaded of it, as though it had already taken place. All this he believed, purely because God had promised it. Now this persuasion of Abraham's mind was highly honorable to God. Whenever we believe any thing on the authority of God's word, we honor him, as a God of truth. This is eminently the case when the accomplishment of God's word is attended with peculiar difficulties, so that our believing it can arise from no cause, but our confidence in the divine veracity and power. Again; Abraham saw the land of Canaan in the possession of a ferocious and powerful people. Yet because he had confidence in God, he believed that the land would be given to his children for an inheritance. Isaac and Jacob believed the same, though to human reason nothing could appear more improbable. The faith of Christians honors God in the same way. They know the greatness of their guilt, the penalty of the law, the justice of God. And yet they believe, purely on the authority of God's word, that they may be pardoned. They know the deceit, the hardness, the obstinacy of their hearts; and yet they have such confidence in God, that they are persuaded he can heal these spiritual maladies, and make them holy. They have such an apprehension of the love, the power, and the faithfulness of God, that they confidently believe, because he hath said it, that all nations, how deplorable soever their present condition, shall be given to Christ for an inheritance; that idolatry, and superstition, and every form of sin and misery shall be banished from the world; that kings, and rulers, and all people shall bow to the King of Zion, and the knowledge of the Lord fill the earth. However difficult the work which God promises to perform; however diverse from any thing they ever knew in other cases; they have such honorable apprehensions of God, that they believe it will certainly be accomplished. Thus, in the exercise of faith, they show their high estimation of the glorious character of God; and this most of all, when they themselves

are in straits ; when they can see nothing but darkness and danger, and when, so far as human power can go, their case is hopeless. To repose trust in God in such circumstances ; to look to him for support, direction and deliverance, when all other help fails, shows what exalted thoughts they entertain of his infinite perfections.

4. It is obvious that *all the defects of our character and conduct are owing to the want, or the weakness of faith.*

Without faith in the general sense, man has in fact no motives to a holy life ; because all the motives to holiness are found in those invisible things which are the objects of faith, and which are brought by faith to have an influence on the mind. Were there no God, no moral government, no law with divine sanctions, no eternal retribution, there would be no motives to holiness, and of course no holiness. And if a man does not cordially *believe* in a moral law and government, and a future retribution, it will be to him just as though there were none. In other words ; there will be nothing, there can be nothing, which will have any influence upon him, as a motive to holy action. It is clear then that faith, in this view, is indispensable to the exercise of holiness. But not to dwell upon this general view of faith ; we know that the Scriptures in various places represent the want or weakness of *Christian faith*, as the cause of what is faulty in the character and conduct of men, and of Christians, as well as others.

Suffer me then, brethren, to use freedom of speech on this subject, and to say, that one of the prominent faults in our character is *a worldly spirit*. Do we not set our affections on earthly friends, relations, riches, honors, and enjoyments ? Does not a regard to these govern our conduct ? Do not the zeal and diligence we show in our pursuits spring chiefly from this source ? See here the consequence of the want of faith.—*This is the victory which overcometh the world*, says an Apostle,

even our faith. If we had faith ; that is, if we cordially and steadily believed what the Scriptures teach ; if we had an abiding, lively sense of the glory of God, the excellence of his law and government, our guilty, and wretched state, the beauty and all-sufficiency of Christ, the endless joys of heaven and the endless sufferings of hell ; if these objects were continually present to our view, and our understandings and hearts were filled with them ; the things of this dying world would all sink into nothing. No earthly pleasures could allure us. None of the honors or riches of the world could excite our desire. Upon them all we should see the broad stamp of vanity and insignificance, and a worldly spirit would die away.

Again. Are we not frequently conscious of *a reluctance to forsake all for Christ* ? He has told us that, if we will do this, *we shall have an hundred fold in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.* Why are we so reluctant ? Why go away from him, as the young man in the gospel did, with heaviness of heart ? It is our *unbelief*, brethren. We are not cordially persuaded of the truth and importance of what Christ declares. The good which he promises we regard not as a precious reality. We do not look upon it with feelings correspondent to its nature and worth. Had we strong, lively faith in the promises of Christ ; there is no present advantage we should not freely relinquish, and no suffering we should not cheerfully undergo, for the sake of that eternal inheritance which he has promised to the faithful.

Are we not conscious of a lamentable degree of *insensibility* and *sloth* in the concerns of religion ? And how is this to be accounted for ? Are not the eternal objects made known by the word of God, of sufficient importance to rouse our attention ? Is not the favour of him who made us, and of him who died for us, and the enjoyment of his everlasting kingdom, worthy of being sought with diligence ? Is not an eternity of insupport-

able suffering dreadful enough to excite our most watchful care to avoid it? Yes, brethren. But our *unbelief* makes all these appear distant and uncertain. It takes away from things eternal their power to interest the heart, and to produce emotion and effort, and leaves us as supine and dormant, as though the glorious objects of religion had no existence.

'Tis unbelief also, that renders us so *indifferent to the salvation of sinners, and the prosperity of the church*. Did we see eternal things in the light of divine truth, and apprehend, in any suitable measure, their importance, their certainty, and their nearness; what a lively sensibility should we have to the interests of our connexions, and friends, and all our fellow men. What concern for immortal souls, ready to perish. What strong desire for their redemption from sin and death. How alive should we be to every thing which stands connected with the prosperity of the church, and the interests of eternity.

It is the want of a lively faith in the great things of the unseen world, that renders us so *superficial and heartless in our devotions*. If in our seasons of secret and social worship, we should have *faith*; if we should look into eternity; should see just before us the resurrection of the dead, the judgment seat, and all the generations of men assembled to receive their irreversible doom; could we be dull and wandering in our prayers? If we knew that all these things were shortly to burst upon our view; would earthly trifles be suffered to break in upon our devotions? Would not all the ardor of our souls be kindled up in our addresses to our God and our Judge?

To this same source we are to trace all the follies and sins apparent in our lives. If the eye of our faith were always open and always fixed on the certain, tremendous, glorious things of another world; if, wherever we went and whatever we did, these eternal objects were present to our view, and had full possession of our feelings; every irregular passion would lose its

power, and we should become circumspect and holy in all our conduct.

And is it indeed so, my brethren, that our earthly mindedness, our reluctance to forsake all for Christ, our insensibility and sloth in religion, our indifference in regard to the prosperity of the church and the salvation of sinners, our dull and heartless devotions, and all the irregularities of our temper and conduct are owing to the want of a steady, strong, lively faith? Of what vast importance is it, then, that we should possess such a faith; and of course, that we should diligently employ those means which are suited to promote it.

Here indulge me a few moments, while I say, that the principal means of promoting a strong, lively faith, is the *exercise* of it. It results from the constitution of the mind, that all our affections and habits are strengthened by exercise. Every time, therefore, that we view eternal things in the light of revelation; every time we look at them with a full persuasion of their certainty, and a suitable sense of their importance; we do something towards promoting a strong, steady faith. This salutary influence of exercising faith is not however in all cases equal in degree, but will be very much according to circumstances; and particularly will it be in proportion to the *difficulty* which attends such an exercise. A single instance of faith, in circumstances like those in which Abraham confidently believed the promise of God, will go farther towards establishing a living principle of faith in the mind, than many acts of faith, where no difficulty is encountered. In such a case as that of Abraham, there is a struggle, a contest. Obstacles are met and removed; enemies are subdued; and the power of faith is established. Take care, then, brethren, when difficulties multiply; when dark clouds are spread over you; when sense and reason are nonplussed, and you have nothing in heaven or earth to rest upon, but the simple word of God; in such cases, take care to

have faith, strong faith. Go forth at the divine word, leaving all, and not knowing whither you go. Sacrifice your Isaacs. March right forward into the sea ; and, if God command, dip your feet in the waters, and wade, and swim, and buffet the waves, believing that God Almighty will help you through.

I have only one more remark ; namely ; that clear views and deep impressions of divine things, and powerful movings of affection towards them, or, which is the same thing, strong, animated exercises of faith, will do vastly more towards a habit of faith, than other exercises which are comparatively feeble and lifeless. You may exercise a weak, unanimated faith many years, and not do so much towards giving the mind the character of steady, unyielding faith, as may be done in an hour or a minute, in which eternal things come with clearness to the soul, waking up all its powers, and exciting acts of vigorous, undivided, unwavering faith. Such acts of faith have an abiding influence. They produce a permanent character. Something as our being transported into the third heaven, and seeing and hearing what Paul saw and heard, would produce an impression on our minds that would remain through life, and show its effects through eternity.

Let us then be sensible how vastly important it is, that divine, eternal things should take deep hold on our minds ; should excite strong emotions ; should rouse all our powers to action ; should fill our capacities, and exhaust the energies of our souls. And let us seize every occasion and apply ourselves to every means, favorable to such a state of mind. By retirement ; by watchful care not to be engrossed with earthly pursuits ; by devoutly reading the Scriptures ; by heavenly contemplation ; by mortifying all sinful affection ; by spiritual converse with divine and eternal objects, and by ardent, incessant desires and prayers after them, let us endeavour to get away from the delusion of sensible things ; to rise above the present world, and

to bring our understandings and hearts under the influence of divine truth ; deeming ourselves happy, when favored with a few moments of clear, spiritual knowledge, and strong faith ; and then advancing from moments to hours, and from hours to days, till we come to look with an undiverted eye at things not seen and eternal, and from morning to night, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, have our feelings and actions all swayed by faith in God. Oh ! blessed attainment ! When shall we rise to any thing like this ? LORD, *increase our faith.*



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